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ABSTRACT

Play is the spontaneous or organized recreational activity of children; it is at the heart of the preschool curriculum. Play aids in the development of physical, intellectual, and social skills. Children's play progresses through three developmental stages: solitary, parallel, and social. Preschool teachers should arrange for four kinds of educative play: (1) manipulative play, which involves handling equipment that has small pieces; (2) physical play, in which the large muscles are used in activities such as running, climbing, or riding a tricycle; (3) dramatic play, which enables a child to assume a role and act it out in informal situations; and (4) games, which for young children should include everyone and have simple rules. Many outdoor and indoor play activities may be organized to encourage the development of new skills; these may use teacher-made materials or naturally occurring phenomena. Some examples are using rocks to make stepping stones in the playground; nature walks to observe or collect insects, leaves, or seeds; blockbuilding; dramatic play; art experiences; water play; sandbox play; and games. The school and teacher are responsible for informing parents about the concepts their children are learning through play, as it is the combined effort of parents and teachers that develops skills and abilities in young children. (CB)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

by Allen Sher

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Play is the spontaneous or organized recreational activity of children. It is pleasureful and absorbing and it has been considered the crux of the preschool experience. Play is necessary for children to function properly and it lies at the heart of the nursery school curriculum.

Play fulfills a wide variety of purposes in the life of a child. It develops physical skills by helping children to develop their large muscles. They do this when they pull a wagon, lift blocks, dig with a shovel, climb on a jungle gym or throw beanbags. In addition, children develop small muscles by using a paintbrush, crayons, and scissors, handling manipulative toys like cars, trucks, and puzzles, by doing finger plays, and by having activities in connection with dressing, buttoning, and lacing shoes.

It develops intellectual skills. Children learn through the use of blocks, e.g., concepts of size (smaller, larger, equal.) By pouring water, children learn liquid measure and volume. Through imagination, children are helped to distinguish between reality and fantasy. When they make believe, young people become masters of the environment. They are in command, they establish the conditions of the moment, and they make choices and decisions as the action progresses.

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It develops social skills. Whenever one child is involved with other children, he learns how to enter a group and be accepted, how to get along with others so that everyone has satisfaction from the play, how to take turns, and the give and take that is the key to successful group interaction.

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Play provides emotional values. Children express negative and positive feelings as they react to the activities in which they are involved. They release their tensions, frustrations, and fears as well as their joys and hopes.

Developmental Stages of Play

Children's play progresses through a series of three developmental stages. Very young children tend to be self-absorbed and to indulge in solitary play. Then, they become involved in parallel activities. They play side by side with other youngsters often using the same materials but largely without social interchange. Finally, children become involved in social play. Here, the activity occurs between two or more children.

A teacher of preschool children should arrange for four kinds of educative play: manipulative play, physical play, dramatic play, and games. Manipulative play involves a child's handling equipment with small pieces: puzzles, peg sets, cuisenaire rods, color cones, beads. Physical play involves the use of large muscles. Activities like running, climbing, jumping, or riding a tricycle help children increase their physical skills or learn to use them in different situations.

Dramatic play enables a person to assume a role and act it out in informal situations. In the housekeeping corner, children take the roles of family members in actions representing home situations. Putting on a piece of clothing like a fireman's hat or a nurse's cap enables a child to make-believe he is a fireman or nurse. Games for young children are a form of play activity but they should be easy, uncomplicated, and quickly learned. The rules must be simple and, at this level, should be designed to include everyone and not eliminate children. Circle games, with or without music, can be used very effectively with young children.

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Outdoor Play Activities

In the day care center, nursery school, and kindergarten, outdoor activities are an essential part of the educational environment. Children need fresh air, physical exercise, a change of pace, and reorientation in space just as much as they need indoor activities. They welcome the general stimulation and different kinds of play possible outdoors. In addition, the child's individual observation of his surroundings and of nature are sharpened by going outdoors. Boys and girls should go out-of-doors some time every day if the weather permits. Much of the outdoor play is spontaneous and young children often play alone as they run on the playground, climb, crawl, dig, swing, or slide.

Outdoor play provides many opportunities for children to be creative and to use their imaginations. To some children, adventure is being up high: at the top of a hill, or on a slide, swing, jungle gym, or tree house. Privacy is being inside something, out of sight, in the child's thinking, from other children and the teacher. He can hide or rest in a playhouse, a tent, a packing case, or a tunnel. Concentration is adapting to achieve a purpose: movable ramps, a hose that unhooks and stretches, a fallen tree to climb on, or blocks to make a bridge. The following are suggested ideas for improvised outdoor equipment:

concrete pipes or barrels make tunnels to crawl through

large rocks or tree stumps are stepping stones when placed in certain patterns

tires can be used for swings

an inner tube is good for rolling

large cardboard cartons or wooden packing cases are props for children to make believe

a raised platform built around a tree makes a fine tree house

gardening tools have multiple uses in dirt and sand.

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Preschool children are permitted and encouraged to have a wide variety of play activities. Concomitant with play are experiences that are part of the regular curriculum. Science is one area where formal and informal learning can take place outside of the classroom. Each year, children should be taught about the seasons in succession. A teacher who takes children on nature walks is having fun in the outdoors and is having children observe the characteristics of the four seasons. Especially in the autumn, children should be helped to observe caterpillars on the ground, changes in the color of leaves, seed pods, birds flying and feeding, and the harvest of foods. Other experiences that children have during a nature walk include:

collecting insects, shells, stones and leaves

a treasure hunt looking for the largest leaf, the smallest cone, the smoothest stone, etc.

observing a bird nest

studying cloud formations and describing the shapes

examining the topography of the play area (flatness, depression or rise in earth surface)

investigating the surface of the yard (cement, stones, soil).

For additional outdoor play activities, a teacher on a windy day should have the children run about, feeling the wind on their faces or play with kites and pinwheels. They may take a walk to the supermarket, florist, or pet shop. Activity in the sandbox is popular and for variety, kitchen utensils should be provided for straining and sifting. Water play should be brought outdoors with children using a hose or sprinkling cans or making bubbles with plastic rings. An old tire, cut lengthwise to form two halves, and filled with water, becomes two canals for sailing boats. Balls of different sizes are a must for a kindergarten playground. Children may use

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a ball for rolling, twirling, bouncing, kicking, and catching. Games with balls may be individual or group.

Just being outdoors supports growth, as a child learns about wind, shadows, rain, ice, and snow. For some youngsters, the outdoor playground offers stimulation that no indoor playroom can give.

Indoor Play Activities

Children's play embraces an extensive repertory of activities and the wide use of toys, play materials, and games. When a child makes discoveries through his play, it is his personal involvement that adds intensity to the experience. Through play, a child learns what no one can teach him.

Play in school is consequently planned with definite purposes. Through play, children learn to get along with one another, develop good habits, and learn about the world around them. Listening to stories, looking at pictures, talking about interesting happenings, playing word games, acting out favorite stories, and looking at books are fun. All of these help to develop a feeling for language and are important experiences in reading readiness. Children are not and need not be aware that when they are playing with blocks, they are learning to count, to compare sizes and shapes, to add and take away. Play is a child's business but it is also his fun.

The arrangement of the room in centers of interest and the choice of equipment and materials permits children to engage in many experiences simultaneously. The following indoor play activities suggest the variety that is available for young children:

blockbuilding,

dramatic play,

art experiences,

waterplay,

sandbox,

games.

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Playing with blocks offers numerous opportunities for growth. Among these are the development of: desirable social habits, cooperative activity, responsibility, effective work habits, mathematical concepts, science learnings, physical skills, and creativity. Stacking, reaching, grasping, lifting, shoving, carrying, and balancing are some of the motor skills that are practiced in block play. As for creative play, blocks, by nature, are unstructured and may be used to build anything that suits the child's fancy. Older children enjoy planning such structures in advance, but younger ones will content themselves with the experience of stacking and balancing for its own sake and perhaps assign a useful function to the construction at a later point in the building.

In dramatic play, a child usually assumes a role. It can take many forms and can arise from almost any classroom or home situation. It may be the play in the housekeeping corner, the reliving of a story, or the rhythms accompanying a chant or musical selection. These dramatic play activities reflect family background and social experience as the children make believe they are driving a car, shopping for groceries, preparing meals, or cleaning house. Teachers can demonstrate respect and appreciation for the adults who perform services at school and in the community when children are encouraged to take the role of the plumber, carpenter, custodian, nurse, or letter carrier. In the early part of the school year, much of the play is self-centered. It takes time and experience for children to invent plots and play roles. As the year progresses, they play less as soloists and more in groups of three and four, with increasingly complex plots and sophisticated oral expression. The dramatic play or housekeeping area may be equipped with tools for make-believe: tables and chairs for eating; stove, cupboard, sink, dishes, silverware, and pots; beds, carriage, doll clothes, dress-up clothes; accessories for playing the roles of father, grandmother, policeman, doctor; cleaning tools such as mops, dust pans,

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brooms, and whatever odds and ends a teacher can assemble that add detail to the imagining and acting.

The young child is by nature an explorer and an inventor and this characteristic is nourished and satisfied through creative art experiences. With the slightest encouragement and given the opportunity, youngsters can carry their play impulses into activities involving art media. At this stage of development, children use art materials for the pleasure of the manipulative experience and the excitement derived from the process rather than from the resulting product. The finished piece of work reveals only a part of the worthwhile experience the child has had in the art of creating. The results of her efforts provide her with a feeling of satisfaction and of self-reliance on her own choice and judgement. In early childhood education, a teacher should plan art experiences that include painting on an easel, finger painting, drawing, modeling with play dough and clay, papercraft, puppetry, woodworking, and art appreciation.

Water play is one of the freest play activities we can provide for children. Some teachers hesitate to include it because they think that youngsters will become uncontrolled or overstimulated. The opposite is usually the case. Water play is absorbing and soothing; children will stay with it a long time and come away refreshed and relaxed. It provides relief from pressures, tensions, and it stimulates social play.

There are bound to be spills, but sensible rules, good protective aprons, and handy sponges give double service in the areas of education and sanitation. The teacher must establish clear guidelines for the protection of the children's health and safety. As they use different learning tools with water, children receive pleasure, gain knowledge, and learn responsibility.

Pouring and measuring develop eye-hand coordination at the same time that they teach the mathematical concepts of estimating and liquid measure. Water

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can be offered in dishpans, sinks, galvanized laundry tubs, or even plastic wading pools. Variations in water play can be provided through different kinds of water(clear, soapy, colored, hot or cold). In addition, water can be used in experiments that show floating and sinking. Unbreakable bottles and funnels of various sizes should be available, together with spoons, ladles, pots and pans and sprinkling cans. Washing of dolls, doll clothes, scrubbing vegetables, and watering the plants have the added appeal of participating in meaningful work.

A child learns many lessons at the sand box. Properties of sand can be explored by running it through fingers, a sieve, sifter, or a screen. Sand, like other unstructured material, takes on different meanings with different accessories. Again, there must be sensible limitations and ground rules in using sand: what goes or does not go into the sandbox; sand cannot be used to throw on the floor or at others. Children, working as a team, often use the whole sandbox to make a display of parks and housing units. By adding miniature objects such as trees, vehicles, animals, and people, they create a community. The outdoor sand pit is only usable during part of the year but the indoor sandbox can be used daily.

The teacher of young children should plan indoor games that give children the exercise they need for building large muscles. Ball handling can be used indoors if it is limited to catching and rolling the ball. Children form a circle, sit down on the floor and spread their legs so that the ball will stay inside the circle. The teacher starts the ball rolling by sending it to one child who returns it to her. With experience in handling and controlling a ball, children will be able to send it back and forth to one another.

Games that are played in the classroom should be simple ones with few rules and directions. The teacher should explain the whole game quickly

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and then give directions for the various parts of the game. Many games can be accompanied by music, providing additional enjoyment. Six categories of games are: singing games, activity games, bean bag games, sense games, ball games, and quiet games. In some circle games, only one player is active. A teacher can hold the interest of more children by starting with two or three players inside the circle doing the required action. Since children do not enjoy waiting to have a turn or watching others play, several small groups working simultaneously keep the entire class actively involved.

Formal classes for preschoolers vary greatly in their size, location and setting. Regardless of whether children gather in a home, a day care center, a nursery school, or a kindergarten, the teacher must work with the children and their parents. Parents, too, have the obligation of arranging that their children have the varieties of play that have been mentioned. Mothers and fathers can provide additional play for their youngsters by having fun around the house, at the supermarket, at the library, at the playground, and at the zoo.

It is the combined effort of parents and teachers that develops skills and abilities in young children. Parents have a right to expect their children to learn in school, even at the nursery school and kindergarten level. The school is likewise obligated to inform parents concerning the concepts that their children are learning through play. It is an important responsibility of the teacher to provide the experiences for play, to observe the children at play, and to interpret the values of play to parents.

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